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COMIC TALK™

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COMIC TALK™

A WORD FROM THE PUBLISHER:

You hold in your hands the first publishing effort of **Buffalo Books**.

This simple volume is deceptive. Beyond paper and ink, it is the physical embodiment of my hopes and dreams, and many years of hard work. My interest in stories and art, in comic books and magazines, and the work of creative minds has always pointed me toward publishing. So, this is an important event for me, a modest start toward the fulfillment of a lifetime dream.

Many of you know me as the head of **Great Eastern Conventions**, the biggest comic convention producer in the country. I have been active in this capacity since 1977 and have come to understand the comic book world and its participants intimately. I hope to use this experience in creating a publication that will be an entertaining and meaningful read.

Which brings us to **COMIC TALK #1.** My goal in bringing out **COMIC TALK** is to satisfy comic book readers who want to know more about the people behind the books. By devoting an entire issue to one person, we can present an in-depth understanding of a comic creator, his work or a single project.

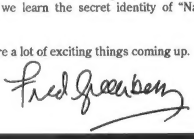
Sam Kieth is the subject of our first issue. Sam, apart from being a very modest man, is one of today's important artists. I mention his modesty first since Sam is very much a human being, not an art machine, not a money machine. He cares about his profession and his readers. He is constantly growing, as his latest opus, **THE MAXX** will attest. Sam has generously given us his time for this interview (and in creating our original cover) and for this we send our thanks.

Plug department: Our interview this issue was conducted by Brian Pulido. Brian is publisher of **Chaos! Comics**, and creator of **Evil Ernie**. I urge everyone to run out to your local comic shop or convention and pick up a copy (or two). I think he did a very good job in bringing in a real interview. Let us know what you think.

Before I go any further, our editor at **Buffalo Books** is Ed Polgardy. Ed is a great guy to work with, and a very talented writer. Check out his popular **FROM THE DARKNESS** series, currently published by the people at **Cry For Dawn**. Ed and I are feverishly working on **COMIC BOOK WEEK**, a weekly newspaper debuting April 2. Look for it.

In future issues of **Comic Talk**: Issue #2 will feature a discussion with Dan Jurgens on the death and resurrection of **Superman**. Issue #3 covers the hot new **Image** title **TRIBE** by Larry Stroman and Todd Johnson. Issue #4 spotlights Erik Larsen, in which we learn the secret identity of "Name Withheld."

I hope you'll stick with us. There are a lot of exciting things coming up.



INTRODUCTION

I first met Sam Kieth about a year ago. He was the featured guest at a Los Angeles comic convention. The line of fans waiting for his autograph was endless and they lugged stacks of his books–there wasn't a set limit. Sam didn't complain. In fact, from where I was standing, he was having a ball.

Toward the middle of the day, Sam's hand cramped up severely, and the line looked longer than ever. Anybody else would have thrown in the towel, and why not? He had already signed a zillion books. He could have taken a breather. He could have called it a day. But he didn't. Sam forged on until every last one of his fans got every one of their books signed.

That little scene sums up what Sam Kieth is all about. He's gone the distance and will continue to do so. Starting in comics almost ten years ago, Sam became an "overnight success" when he teamed with Peter David on the "Wolverine vs. Cyber" serial that ran in Marvel Comics Presents. A slew of covers followed, featuring heroes whose radical physiques confounded the senses. There is no doubt, Sam Kieth is a stylist.

Sam will tell you he can't draw. But don't listen to him. He is perpetually questioning himself and his work. He wonders out loud if a plot could be sharpened, if a page could be more dynamic, if a panel is working or if the dialogue feels right. Sam doesn't take a thing for granted. That's his edge.

I caught up with Sam just as he was finishing the first issue of his new book for Image Comics, THE MAXX.

SAM:

Brian Pulido: Sam, I read an advanced ashcan copy of The Maxx #1 and at the end of the story, I wanted to know more. Is the Maxx going to be a mentally ill, homeless guy? Is the Maxx an animal spirit? I have lots of questions.

Sam Kieth: Too many questions, huh? Maybe told poorly for that reason.

BP: No, not at all. I thought just the opposite. At the end of a comic book reading experience it's great to want more!

SK: Oh man, I was really depressed last night; I read it for the first time. I mean I read it in bits and chunks, but it was really weird working from the plot and the dialogue. In most places I would describe motivations to Bill [William Messner-Loebs] and then he would write it. We would see what would happen, but then sometimes we'd go back into that and sometimes we wouldn't.

BP: What was the original inspiration for this? The Maxx is a fairly complex character.

SK: Man, that would be great if he became even half way complex. All the things I was hoping to convey haven't even come out yet. What I'm hoping to do in the second issue is to try to bring out some characters that the reader will give a crap about. I really wanted you to care about Julie, and I don't think you have time to really care about the hero. And I'm not sure we even achieved that. I'm hoping that we can go deeper into her personality in the second issue. In the back of my mind, I had teased myself into thinking that we had succeeded but when I read it, I said, "Nope," if I could read this comic or eat a cheese sandwich, I'd dive into the cheese sandwich. For me it just seemed like any other comic and I want so bad to do really great work. So much work falls short of being really great. It's above average and it's got an interesting edge to it.

Chester Brown does a lot of interesting things. Somebody who digs really deep is Alan Moore. Neil Gaiman tends to write really well sometimes, kind of hit-and-miss other times, but his batting average is higher than a lot of other writers. As a comic creator you think "I can do that." So you sit down, and you think "Maybe I'm doing great work, yeah this is all the stuff inside me," and then if it seems like if 30% gets on the page it's a fucking miracle!

BP: In The Maxx, one thing that's interesting and it's a departure for the Image stuff, is there's a dark, urban psychology. It's inferred three or four times throughout this story that Julia is definitely walking on very dangerous ground. There's been rape and mutilation in the city. And her feeling is that she's making a conscious choice to stay in the city, to be in this nasty territory. So there's got to be something behind it. I thought you were successful in that area.

SK: Really? Well that's interesting. I'm glad it came through even

in a crude or clumsy way. I kept hammering it home to Bill that essentially Julia was a huge Camille Paglia fan and he had seen her on 60 Minutes. He was simply appalled by Camille Paglia and her anti-Steinem brand of feminism and I thought this would be the perfect character for him to write. He'd been writing too many characters that he gives a crap about. Now Bill needed to take a character with unsympathetic politics and make her likeable. He felt I was giving him a hell of a chore. As he was writing, I kept saying, "More acidic, more sarcastic," and finally he pulled back and said, "I don't even give a crap about her." We had to make her somewhat likable, but tried to create a character who was kind of shady, and was practicing without a license. She was working through the supervision of a psychologist who happened to be her landlady. Actually, my wife is a practicing psychologist, so I was trying to pepper it with things with which she was familiar. She cared about Maxx. But she had misgivings when she came into this job because she wanted to manipulate people, control their lives. On the positive side she also has the "Florence Nightingale wanting to help people syndrome." This is the kind of stuff in really good alternative comics. I was kind of surprised when Jim Lee said he liked it because I thought that some of the Image guys might comment that there wasn't enough curlicues in Maxx's costume when it ripped or something.

BP: Yeah the classic Sam Kieth Curlicue.

SK: The problem is alternative guys like the kind of comics we used to read in the '80s. He wants something between Cerebus and Chester Brown. Part of me wants to produce the kind of comics I read when I was 13. What you get in The Maxx is splash pages of his body lying in a police car in the first part of the story, and then 24 pages of little Izzes chasing Maxx in other parts of the story. I'm at war with the storyteller and the artist. I know that sounds melodramatic, but do you know what I mean? The artist probably wants just two big splash pages to really have a visceral effect and the storyteller says, "fuck that, let's do really good down-to-the-wire storytelling."

BP: Well it makes sense. Two years from now, people are going to say, this dude bridged the gap between the alternative and the mainstream.

SK: We're never going to get a real characterization like in real books. If we're lucky we'll be able to produce something which people will actually give a crap about, to then pick up a second and third issue. I wanted to create something where essentially what the book's about, the girl and Maxx, is just a facade. I got the idea that Maxx was like the spirit animal for this girl. She'll be our point of view. It's not entirely easy to try to talk Bill into the idea that there's a sympathetic character that has these feelings about sexuality. I wanted to make a character that could be outrageous and right up front about her sexuality.

BP: Here's a comment about Julia.

"I WANTED TO MAKE A CHARACTER THAT COULD BE OUTRAGEOUS AND RIGHT UP FRONT ABOUT HER SEXUALITY."

Her fashion is amazing. Where did you get those bell bottoms and stuff from? They're great!

SK: Gee, you're the first person who said they're great.

BP: Well, my wife wears bell bottoms. It's 1993 and everybody's wearing platforms and bell bottoms again.

"SHE TENDED TO BE THE TYPE OF A GIRL THAT WOULD PROBABLY ATTEND A LED ZEPPELIN CONCERT RATHER THAN LISTEN TO ELTON JOHN RECORDS."

SK: Well now they are. I grew up in the '70s. I was going to put all these '70s references in which were going to make The Maxx even more popular to people over mid-20's and 30's, but I pulled back.

BP: I remember graduating high school and still kind of wearing my bootlegs.

SK: I just grew up with girls that tended to dress that way. I'll tell you one thing is that I wanted somebody that dressed in somewhat outrageous fashions, but then tended to have the tattered jeans which was kind of a different fashion than the plastic go-go boots and some of the more plastic type of fashion.

BP: That's the high-end alternative. This seems to be more hippie-chic. Does that make sense?

SK: Yeah.

BP: Yeah, she's curvaceous instead of angular.

SK: And she tended to be the type of a girl that would probably attend a Led Zeppelin concert rather than listen to Elton John records.

BP: You definitely get that feeling from her.

SK: But that's something that the kids won't have the foggiest clue of. I can see some kid saying why is Maxx fighting somebody so skinny?

BP: When is that coming up? Some fighting action on a bridge overpass in #2?

SK: Hey, man, you've been reading all this stuff, haven't you?

BP: Yeah, pretty much. I have this statistician approach to comics...it's horrifying. I can name letterers and colorists of the '60s, it's terrible.

SK: Wow. That can be kind of handy when it comes to something like this where you have to call up information.

BP: Do you think all your uncertainties are necessary to keep you excited in what you do?

SK: Only if those things are presented in such a way that you say "I want to find out about the little, short, black guys that run around, the Izzes." If you want to find out what's the deal with the hands that are reaching up and grabbing him in the field. I really needed to be careful, but without Bill's help it would not have come across. Mike Heisler who edited The Maxx used to work at Marvel. His goal was to try to make very clear to a 12 year old that this comic has slightly different goals. I was wondering if things are clear enough? Mike felt some things weren't clear. At Marvel they tell the reader right up front what the heck is going on because we couldn't afford to sacrifice any particular subtlety. A book for Dark Horse, where the reader is older, you can afford to leave some questions unanswered because you assume the reader has the attention span and the ability to focus to understand the creators are teasing you, they're not necessarily giving you all the facts. On the floorboard The Maxx was 10 times better than this. When

"YOU HAVE TO BE SKILLFUL IN SO MANY AREAS TO DRAW A GOOD COMIC. IF YOU CAN DO JUST ONE OF THEM YOU'RE A GENIUS."

I get in there, in the middle of the book, I wonder, "What the hell am I doing? There are many things to consider in creating a book. Making all the panels so that each one looks like it's supposed to, inking it, working with somebody else, doing a good job on the pencils and inks, that's just one skill. Then making sure a car looks like a car, that a truck looks like a truck, that each figure's gestures are right. That's a whole separate skill. The book could look beautiful, be technically professional, but yet be boring. You have to be skillful in so many areas to draw a good comic. If you can do just one of them you're a genius.

BP: You don't seem wholly satisfied with #1. How would you approach it differently now?

SK: It's too late. I've got to do #2.

BP: I would arm-wrestle you if we were in person because I think you've accomplished a lot more than you're giving yourself credit for. I know in the past you have worked with Peter David. Were you satisfied with that work? Were there things you'd want to change, or do from a storytelling perspective?

SK: Of course. At Marvel it's kind of a high demand type of a system. Marvel's convinced me that every two weeks, you had to feed the machine regardless.

BP: You went for some radical panels on Wolverine vs. Cyber. It was cool. You really went for it.

SK: Well I had the luxury of working many months in advance, almost a whole year. I was able to toil away on it. The tough thing about Maxx was that I had hopes of doing something that I've never done before. I'm basically learning that everybody I've worked with I pretty much...I've never been completely able to guide characters and I've always had the desire to do something just a little bit better. The only reason that Wolverine had a dream in the Wolverine story I did was because I wanted to draw hot-dog cars.

BP: You're very self-effacing, you try to diminish your contributions a lot.

SK: Don't you hate anybody who really thinks that they're the vessel, that they think they're focused. They think they can control it. It is always very sad. They get older, their talent seems to go downhill, they lose their edge and people say, "Yeah I really liked that work you did 20 years ago when you were hungry and young." It's kind of sad and then they usually come back, maybe when they are in their 40's and try to do something, but

it's not the same. Everybody says "Wasn't their earlier work better?" And then there's some young guy out there and he's the hot guy. It just seems like a sad, eventual deterioration.

BP: What's your impressions on violence in comics?

SK: I get the impression when I read these books that the creators think that they're doing something that's really dramatic.

BP: Alan Moore said something recently in The Comic's Buyers Guide regarding his role in the coming of the new, darker heroes. He said through Watchman, he ushered in a new age of dark, fascistic, violent heroes. I would say that he's partially right. I think that a lot of people are using violence as a point of departure, but maybe they don't feel it in their groin, where they really have to feel it.

SK: I think that may be true, but the problem with a lot of the botched vigilante stories that we got after the Dark Knight is that the artists just don't have Frank Miller's skill to pull it off. They just don't have the finesse.

BP: The Dark Knight and Watchmen seemed to trigger a lot of darkness in people and they're venting.

SK: And I'm stuck there, too. I am stuck in the fish bowl trying to get out, but I think the vigilante thing is an important phase.

BP: The dark hero?

SK: Think about it in the way that young girls reach for their Barbie comics. Before they discover a more subtle feeling for it. Barbie is bright lipstick and bright yellow hair. Everything is real primary and real simple. It's the same way with teenage boys. They tend to reach for the most obvious and simple version of masculinity. There's another level of masculin-

"THE PROBLEM WITH A LOT OF THE BOTCHED VIGILANTE STORIES THAT WE GOT AFTER THE DARK KNIGHT IS THAT THE ARTISTS JUST DON'T HAVE FRANK MILLER'S SKILL TO PULL IT OFF."

ity that's subtler that you'll probably spend the rest of your life pursuing. I think that it's a necessary phase and for parents to get upset about comic book violence is saying you're going to be upset about a cartoonish magnification of masculinity.

BP: It's comics, it's fantasy, it's escapist stuff and people tend to get scared when it's written too well.

SK: I hate to sound whiny, but the bottom line is, I'm stuck with only this much ability and this much skill, and talent is probably the lowest on the list. I approach my work from a tactical point of view. Yes, I try to get projects that more people will see, but I try to do things that reflect more of me. Ultimately, for me, there are just too many limits. I'm forced to set my sights lower.

BP: To me, The Maxx is a hybrid between mainstream comics and alternative comics. It's something new. Sometimes I feel sensitive about that issue, but then I realize

"TO ME, THE MAXX IS A HYBRID BETWEEN MAINSTREAM COMICS AND ALTERNATIVE COMICS. IT'S SOMETHING NEW."

Todd McFarlane is breaking down all sorts of expectations and forcing you to believe certain things about the character. I have the sneakiest feeling that with all the other writers coming on board to help write Spawn, our expectations are going to be twisted around.

SK: No kidding. That's going to be real interesting. I assume he's giving them a pretty free rein.

BP: That's what I hear.

SK: Yeah. It's going to be interesting to see how Todd will bring that back around once he starts writing it again. I have a lot of respect for anybody that can pencil and ink a whole book every month like he's doing.

BP: Plus his noodley detail.

SK: Yeah. I notice he's very careful about placing the noodley detail in places where you look. I mean, there's just got to be some time-saving element.

BP: Here's an entirely different subject regarding Todd's work. This guy's on another planet when

it comes to graphics and composition.

SK: Yeah. Very strong sense of design. If there is an element that really stands out, it would probably be his sense of design, and a certain pizzazz he has in drawing the characters. There are people who have a lot more structure underneath, that are more disciplined like Jim Lee and Mark Silvestri, not to suggest that Todd isn't disciplined. It's just that the other artists tend to admire Jim's work and jump into Todd's work a little more.

BP: I think he has that "it" quality you just can't describe. I think the recent issues of Spawn, it's so crazy, the panel borders are bones, they are not flat on the paper. They are raked 30 degrees towards the reader. He goes for it.

SK: I've been wondering about that. I tried to pull back from doing a lot of wild things in this issue with borders, but I'm always...

BP: (laughs)

SK: What's the matter?

BP: Is that what you think?

SK: Why, I failed?

BP: Your paneling is outrageous! Right now I'm staring at page 22 and the Maxx is about to have a fight on the top of a gas station island and the paneling is outrageous on that.

SK: Sometimes people will do bizarre things with panels and it gets your attention. Todd's good at it, but there are some people, I won't even mention names, but they don't do it well. You read it and you wonder, why is this panel shaped this way? It doesn't make any sense to me.

BP: Well Todd's doing it from an emotional base, I think.

SK: Yeah and when you look at it you never say, why is it shaped that way? You know it's just subconscious. I think that he does it on auto-pilot and it just clicks in so that it doesn't get in the way of the story. He's a very inspiring guy

and the fact that Steve Oliff is coloring it makes me feel like everybody's set in place to make this book look really good. All I've got to do is try to rise to that. If I could get The Maxx looking one quarter as good as that, then I'll be happy because so far everybody's book looks pretty good, you know. It's like their own universe is reflected in it.

BP: Switching gears, what's your take on today's alternative comics?

SK: It seems like there's a lot more quirkiness in them than now. Sarcasm and cynicism, I think kids from here on can expect to see more of it.

BP: I can't even imagine what comics will be like in the year 2000.

SK: The banality will be inconceivable. I'll tell you one thing. Up until now there hasn't been enough money in comics for the really ugly and violent Hollywood people to get involved. Now it may be changing. Do you think it will become like this, Brian? Do you think this is the beginning?

BP: My big fear would be a couple of guys from Harvard Business School armed with their MBA's getting involved in comics. I've already heard rumblings that certain movie studios are going to start to develop comic book companies, which will be used as a tax write-off for research and development. Now, comics are still mom and pop. You go to cons, you sort of get on a first name basis with everybody and generally everybody is kind of mellow.

SK: Yeah it's like a club.

BP: Things could get really crazy in the future where we have true gold cover comics retailing for $700.

SK: At that point it won't be our say anymore because it will belong to another generation. We'll have this sense that they're stealing our medium but it's really none

"I DON'T KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT THIS WHOLE VALIANT THING, BECAUSE THEY'RE REALLY DEEMPHASIZING THE ARTIST."

of our business, because it will either be kept alive or not by the younger generation. We'll just be whining about X-Men the way other people whine about Golden Age comics.

BP: I think that's what's going to happen.

SK: It'll be really fun because suddenly everybody that's really old will just know about X-Men and then the people who know about Golden Age stuff will be seen as real dinosaurs, or it will be so cool to know about the really old stuff, some people will actually go back and learn it. In a way people are appalled by the '70s and '60s, but now it's fashionable because it's been 20 years.

BP: I heard in a Jerry Ordway interview that DC is perceived as your grandfather's comic company, Marvel is perceived as your father's comic company, Image is perceived as the company of today. It's going to be funny 20 years from now-what is it going to be like Necro-Mega Comics? All these cyber-kids data-basing stuff, downloading it right into their pupils or something.

SK: I still haven't gotten used to the idea that, not the original X-Men, but the X-Men that Byrne did in the '80s are gone and that today they are a different set of characters.

BP: They're all different now.

SK: It's changed since I was doing Wolverine. It's going to keep changing and the more it changes, the more I don't become involved in it.

BP: That's probably why Image and Valiant seem to be real popular right now, because more people...like let's say your average 15 year old, can he collect 150 Marvel titles? I don't think so. But can he try to collect all of the Image universe? I'm noticing at cons, everybody's saying, "Can I have my Valiants?" I don't know if people are buying Valiants because they're speculating, or they like to actually read the comics.

SK: I have no idea. It's got to be one of the most fantastic phenomena out there or this Wizard stuff's working.

BP: Wizard works, let me tell you.

SK: Yeah I know. I don't know how I feel about this whole Valiant thing, because they're really de-emphasizing the artist. They emphasize the books. That's really a strong company point of view. If I was a publisher I would probably do that. As an artist, it's essentially saying...I mean they did the Valiant art show a while back. They didn't have the artist show, they

had the art show. It seems diametrically opposite in some ways to Image where if the creator walks off the book, unless he drops somebody else in to draw it, it's otherwise held up by the creator. Do you think that's a very typical comic book thing, or do you think it's kind of sinister or what?

BP: Right now it's really hard to figure out what's next because there are so many

variables in the marketplace.

SK: You know what would be great, and they probably have the technology to do it? You've seen these greeting cards you open up and they play a little jingle? If you could figure out a way to have sound effects and dialogue to be coded in the side of a page, so that if you ran your finger along the side of the paper, or open the page and certain sounds would come out. I think that would be a clever gimmick. I don't think it would enhance the reading of the comic book one damn bit.

BP: Right. "Spider-Man I want to eat your brain!"

SK: Yeah. Oh man, you reminded me of that Ren and Stimpy thing.

BP: I'm aware of something that I definitely can't talk about on record. It is a very concentrated plan to take the comic book form and to push it into areas that have never been done before, and I've seen some of the work. I was pretty knocked out by the ambitiousness of the plan. If it worked, it would completely change graphic storytelling. Pretty wild stuff.

SK: You're generating all of this curiosity in the people that are reading this.

BP: It's pretty cool though. It's the next logical step.

SK: Can you talk about it to me off the record?

BP: I can do that.

SK: Well we'll talk about that later and we'll leave everyone else out.

BP: Just sign a non-disclosé statement, you can't say anything about it.

BP: I really love Peter David's writing. What was it like working with him.

SK: I don't know. What is this thing he has where he says that he has no problem with Todd? All this stuff winds up in CBG.

BP: Well that's not for me to say, but I...

SK: Do you get a feeling for that? Am I nuts?

BP: Oh, boy. Okay I'll go on record on one issue that I start to see developing. There's definitely different generations of comic creators out there right now. I think a lot of the younger generation has the heat right now and I think the older generation is having a hard time understanding everything

"IF YOU COULD FIGURE OUT A WAY TO HAVE SOUND EFFECTS AND DIALOGUE TO BE CODED IN THE SIDE OF A PAGE, SO THAT IF YOU RAN YOUR FINGER ALONG THE SIDE OF THE PAPER, OR OPEN THE PAGE AND CERTAIN SOUNDS WOULD COME OUT. I THINK THAT WOULD BE A CLEVER GIMMICK."

that's going on. I really am a very big fan of Peter David's work but I'm starting to see him bellyache about a lot of little things. Todd's a very controversial dude, he says what he feels and his attitudes keep changing. A couple people seem to have a hard-on for him, John Byrne for one.

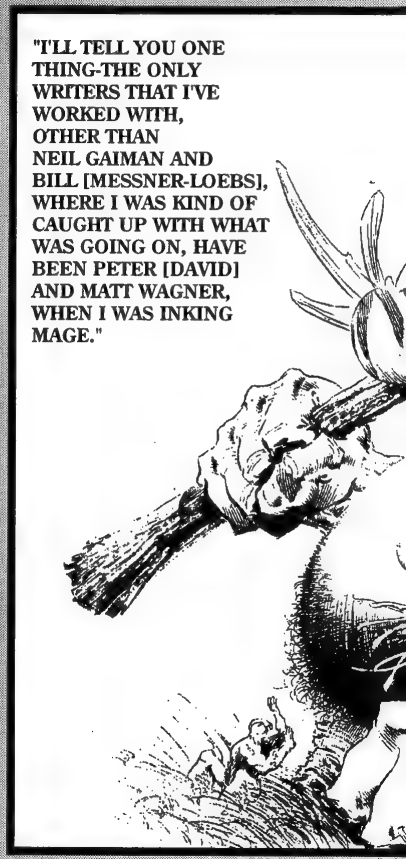
SK: Well you got your finger on it right there. I think you really summed it up, that it's probably a generational thing. I've talked to Peter, I got along with him.

BP: I was just curious about the actual work at the end of the day because I've looked at Peter David's work, I'm assuming he works Marvel style: he hands out a plot and it's up to the penciller to break down the plot into pages and panels. Peter David seems to have a real musical meter to his writing. Every scene has a beginning, middle and end, and regardless of who he's worked with I see that coming through.

SK: Yeah, I know. He's been trying to crack certain movie markets. I hope he does. If I ever run across somebody in any position to help him I would not hesitate to do so because I think he has a real feeling for writing pop movies. He has a sense of humor and a quick wit that would be perfect for some movies that have a sense of action. He's a real natural. I guess a certain amount of talent just pops through.

BP: Not bad for a guy from the Marvel Marketing Department, huh?

SK: That might have something to do with it. I'm trying to think of the scripts he gave me for Wolverine or even the issues of the Hulk I did a long time ago. I remember the issue of the Hulk that he gave me. In #368, he had a sequence where Bruce Banner was talking to–apparently Marvel had some lame character called Mr. Hyde, the upteenth version of Marvel's mutilation of a classic character,


"I'LL TELL YOU ONE THING-THE ONLY WRITERS THAT I'VE WORKED WITH, OTHER THAN NEIL GAIMAN AND BILL [MESSNER-LOEBS], WHERE I WAS KIND OF CAUGHT UP WITH WHAT WAS GOING ON, HAVE BEEN PETER [DAVID] AND MATT WAGNER, WHEN I WAS INKING MAGE."

he had actually written out a certain amount of dialogue between the characters, and essentially that was the issue. They're in a train, they're talking and that was done full script, but mostly...

BP: That was full script?

SK: Yeah it was. It was kind of a change. He said okay, "They're in a train, Banner says lay under a train," and then here's this dialogue which I liked better because I could actually play off of dialogue with certain panels rather than draw a literal interpretation of a dramatic situation. I kind of have a certain edge for augmenting or changing the rhythm if I'm mating the panels to the words. But if the writer has a chance to put the words in over the art, it can be a disappointment. I think that's why Byrne was always complaining about Claremont, because Claremont gets the chance to put in the words after the art has been finished. Peter David seems to be at his best when he plans something out, or he has to do it all of a sudden.

BP: Yeah, he's good at it.

SK: He's able to pull rabbits out of a hat and make a story. In Wolverine vs. Cyber that started out going in one direction and went completely off, 365 degrees, came back around again and while it's probably not a very traditional story, it actually holds together pretty well and some people felt that it's held up against Weapon X which is no small feat considering the press that Weapon X got. I'll tell you one thing–the only writers that I've worked with, other than Neil Gaiman and Bill, where I was kind of caught up with what was going on, have been Peter and Matt Wagner, when I was inking Mage. I got excited when I was inking them because I would read it before I inked it. It was alive for me, you know? What happens in this issue? I'd feel the same way about Peter's plots. There was this dra-

matic scene where Cyber bites out Wolverine's eye and I swear to God I was cooking spaghetti and Peter called me and he read what's going to happen and I swear Peter tells me Wolverine bites out the eye, he rolls it around in his mouth, he shows it to Cyber with his teeth and spits it out. I swear he told me that and he swears he didn't. So I drew that and I sent it in and they showed it to Bob Harris, who's the X-Men editor, and he says, "No way, give me a break!" In the end, Wolverine grabs in Cyber's eye from the back, you see Cyber yelling, and then you just see him spitting something off panel and so forth. I'm pretty sure...I mean, I wouldn't have come up with something that violent if Peter hadn't described it so violent. Maybe it was just all those melted spaghetti noodles that I was looking at. (*laughs*) I'm on a tangent again! Sorry.

BP: The tangential approach is fine. As you're doing The Maxx, are you going to continue to do some work for Marvel and other companies?

SK: Interesting question. I don't know. I saw Dale Keown did a cover for Malibu. What did you think of that? Do you think that meant anything or not?

BP: I'm getting the feeling that that cover was done before the break with Malibu or something like that. I think it may have been in the box for a while.

SK: They called me about a couple of covers. God, everybody's calling me about covers nowadays.

BP: Yeah I've seen your covers popping up on the spoof comics and stuff, The Pummiller.

SK: That was Don Chin. Years ago I did his "Radioactive Hamsters" book because it was the only book I could get pencilling

work on after I inked Mage. I had a lot of fun doing it, but it was right in the middle of the black and white boom. A lot of people thought I was a real scum-sucker for drawing hamsters. I had a great time. I never felt like I was above drawing them at all. I couldn't get any other work. I said, "Nobody's reading this, I'll just have fun drawing it." Ever since then I always felt like trying to help Don out a little bit. I got the Detective Comics gig, because I thought I was going to lose the Marvel covers because Terry Kavanagh wasn't going to edit it anymore, but then he was still editing it and then I was doing two covers. Then Detective went bi-weekly so I was doing like four covers a month and I was doing the front and back covers on Marvel Comics Presents so that meant four every month for Marvel and two every month for DC. The math didn't work, so I asked Terry if I could take some time off from the Marvel covers. It looks like I'm going to have to say no to doing another Wolverine/Cyber story and I want to do covers of that. It's just a time thing. I still get calls from people at Marvel. I get along fine with those people.

BP: Everything was cool?

SK: Yeah, the way I left it with them is I'm going to take some time off and we would get back together in the future.

BP: They definitely seemed to give you free rein on the Marvel Comics Presents covers. Is that true?

SK: No kidding. What's the deal on that, huh? How's a young punk

"COMIC BOOK CREATORS ARE BEING PERCEIVED AS ROCK STARS, AS SPORTS FIGURES, AS CELEBRITIES. HAND IN HAND WITH W.I.L.D. CATS IS JIM LEE, THE PERSON. YOU KNOW WHAT HE LOOKS LIKE."

–BRIAN PULIDO–

"I'M FAR TOO MUCH IN THE MIDDLE OF MY OWN BULL-CRAP TO BE HAVING ANY OBJECTIVITY ABOUT IT. I THINK OTHER PEOPLE REALLY HAVE A CLUE. OTHER PEOPLE ARE MAJOR PLAYERS. IF TODD WANTS TO DO SOMETHING, HE PRETTY MUCH GOES OFF AND DOES IT. JIM AND ROB ARE TREADING NEW DIRECTIONS. I DON'T SEEM TO BE A PERSON THAT HAS A VISION SO MUCH AS I JUST SEEM TO BE ONE OF THE PEOPLE IN A GROUP OF PEOPLE THAT ARE DOING SOMETHING." *--SAM KIETH-*

like me able to...

BP: I loved how Wolverine's helmet ears got bigger and bigger. It was gnarly.

SK: Some kids would write in about the characters. Are Ghost Rider's feet getting too big or his shoulder pads getting ridiculous.

BP: I loved the shoulder pads. They should keep those things. They're like pieces of wood, right?

SK: It kind of looks like it, doesn't it? Originally they were supposed to be shoulder pads but I don't know. The only thing that kind of worried me about Marvel is when they started taking creator's names off of things. They wanted to do a card set with some of my Wolverine work, the ones that I had drawn which is kind of a joke because I just felt like I was doing Art Adams/John Byrne Wolverines. I just did the stuff and they said they wanted to do something, but Marvel suddenly changed and they weren't having Todd McFarlane Spider-Man card sets. Instead they were just having Spider-Man card sets with the name taken off. I guess they don't want creators wandering off after they get big.

"THE ONLY THING THAT KIND OF WORRIED ME ABOUT MARVEL IS WHEN THEY STARTED TAKING CREATOR'S NAMES OFF OF THINGS."

BP: De-emphasizing, right?

SK: That didn't leave a great taste in my mouth but they have their point of view. I can't see taking the position of never working for a company again. I guess the politically correct thing to say is that there's no reason for any bitter feelings between Marvel and Image, but then we also know that that's certainly not what everybody's saying.

BP: Everybody could go on the final record for days and it's still going to be a gray matter issue I

think. It's very threatening to an established company who has built a franchise based on people's ideas. To have Image branch out and say, "We want to be responsible for our own destinies," is a very threatening concept to a company that's used to grossing close to half a billion dollars a year. What if they just keep building up people that go off and do this?

SK: I wouldn't be too worried if I was Marvel. I think you're right about it posing enough of a threat that Marvel's probably dealing with us like they dealt with the Dark Horse market expanding years ago although only on a much more aggressive and fast-paced rate. Ultimately, time is on Marvel's side. I remember when Jack Kirby and Neal Adams were doing Pacific Comics and everybody was saying, "Hey, this is going to be a new wave." It kind of stopped before it started.

BP: Comic book creators are being perceived as rock stars, as sports figures, as celebrities. Hand in hand with W.I.L.D.Cats is Jim Lee, the person. You know what he looks like. Most people don't know what Jack Kirby looked like. We're into a weird transition where the creator becomes as important as the property. The Jack Kirby "king" never got his due.

SK: Obviously not. They used to be burning his pages for storage space.

BP: Yeah, they used to throw the old animation cells out also.

SK: I'm far too much in the middle of my own bull-crap to be having any objectivity about it. I think other people really have a clue. Other people are major players. If Todd wants to do something, he

pretty much goes off and does it. Jim and Rob are treading new directions. I don't seem to be a person that has a vision so much as I just seem to be one of the people in a group of people that are doing something.

BP: After The Maxx, do you have any plans?

SK: It takes all my energy to get The Maxx done. There's a lot of people that have doubted whether this will come out because of the company history. If Darker Image was shipping a little bit late, I wasn't going to be surprised. I just wanted The Maxx to come out a little more often than some of the other books. I had to transmit different messages to people's subconscious that were working on the book and let them know that I wanted certain things to happen at a certain time rather than just randomly. I had to send out schedules to people to indicate the breakdown for the next six months.

BP: Yeah, what your agenda is. It must be an interesting position to be in, because now you are totally responsible for the production, overseeing the tempo of the whole thing.

SK: Yeah and it's no fun. (*laughs*)

BP: Boy, all that little noodley stuff nobody knows about definitely is a pain.

SK: Yeah and I have new respect for people that edit a comic book. The key is to try not to let all that stuff interfere with the book. I was only able to do about eight pages a month in Marvel Presents and everybody said you're never going to get there with these eight pages, you've got to be doing a book and you have to try to do it every month.

BP: I was surprised that your style was allowed to emerge through the Marvel house style.

SK: There are a lot of house editors at Marvel. When I first came on board I carefully went over exactly what would and wouldn't happen with some of the editors.

But with Terry [Kavanagh], bless his heart, I just happened to find an editor that was either inspired or bored enough that would let all this stuff get through. Once you reach the people, then you're fine, but you've got to get it through the editor to reach the people. If you think about all the artists that are really good coming up in comics and by the time they get to Marvel and DC their stuff, like you say, looks like everyone else. With Wolverine, I said that I really want this to look nice, I want to give it everything I've got. Even if nobody sees this stupid story at least I'll go to my grave drawing a really wacky looking Wolverine. The other part of me says, "I should draw it Marvel style. I should draw it just like John Buscema."

BP: If Sam Kieth wasn't Sam Kieth and you didn't meet Terry and you were showing your stuff to Marvel, they would say, "Oh, this isn't what we can use."

SK: Oh, they said it. Every company that's out there, I showed my work to them and they said no. I got a no from everybody. You know I was hoping for an opening in Swamp Thing. I would go and stand in lines at Marvel, stand in lines at DC. Guess who else was standing in the same lines? Valentino. A lot of our friends from alternative comics would look over and say, "Look who's standing in the Marvel line! Why don't you be an alternative guy?" They would snub standing in line like a fan boy. Well you know that old line is true: if you stand on the highest rock and reach the most people and can produce something modestly interesting, it will get more attention than doing something fantastic in the corner. I had gone to Marvel and got turned down the first couple of

"A LOT OF OUR FRIENDS FROM ALTERNATIVE COMICS WOULD LOOK OVER AND SAY, "LOOK WHO'S STANDING IN THE MARVEL LINE! WHY DON'T YOU BE AN ALTERNATIVE GUY?" THEY WOULD SNUB STANDING IN LINE LIKE A FAN BOY."

times and I probably wasn't really ready to produce the quantity or work they wanted. When I went to DC for work, I was on the verge of being ready. By that point I had gone to some of the other smaller companies, you know Comico at that time was out there and Eclipse and all those companies. It's amazing that I thought I was ready, but I wasn't, but I keep thinking of all these people that are sure they're ready. It's almost like if you think you're ready, you're probably not.

BP: I can relate to what you're saying.

SK: It's true. The weird thing is, ten years ago I was looking at Art Adams' work. He was doing Longshot at the time. Mike Mignola and Art Adams were always hanging out together and then suddenly like whoa, Art Adams exploded. Everybody was looking at his stuff saying, "Gee, why is this guy exploding?" I was thinking two things alternately: 1) that lucky bastard, I'd love to be him, and 2) oh, that bastard, how dare him. I'd like to be in that position. It seems like he's an instant projectile for all your fears, hopes, fantasies. Relatively speaking it wasn't like it is now. It wasn't like when Rob Liefeld shows up and there's a crowd scene, but it seemed, at that time, like a big deal. Now if there's even a small group of people around me, what I want to say if somebody is look-

ing at me and they're thinking, "That guy just seems to have appeared overnight. What's the deal with that guy?" I want to say, "You know all those bad drawings in your closet that you're using like little bodies to stand on to get out of the tube you're in, to get out of this garbage can, I've been there, I know what these are about. I've tasted the failure you've tasted." I say it and people just don't hear it.

BP: Sam Kieth is a ten year overnight success.

SK: Yeah. I guess it's now part of the illusion. It's the same reason I don't want to hear that it takes somebody else ten years. If I knew it would have taken ten years, I wouldn't have done it. I know I should say I'd like to do it if I had to do it all over again I wouldn't change it, but fuck no, I'd change it completely, I'd get successful in the first year. That's exactly what I would do.

BP: Make it simpler, right?

SK: Well, the other side of the coin is that there are some people whose best work seems to come up first but it just wasn't my fate.

BP: I don't mean to sound corny, but don't you think the goal of the journey is not necessarily to arrive?

SK: No, I like that. I always had the feeling that it's been my whole struggle to try not to get so hooked up into the goal of things, the really ironic thing is that after all this time, it's all punctuated by these key points. This Image book is one, the Wolverine story was another. You're called upon at a moment in time, to do something that a lot of people will see- hundreds of thousands, as opposed to say the five thousand you usually reach. Money is not the goal, and I know now that the problem is nobody will ever hear me because they're always convinced that people working at Image are all millionaires and have no problems.

BP: That's a whole other problem. I've witnessed that when I used to work with Rick Ruben for Def Jam Records.

SK: Oh really? They called Simon Bisley up about doing one of the Public Enemy top covers. I thought he should have done that.

BP: He definitely should have done that.

SK: How is it working over there?

BP: It was really cool.

SK: I would say in general the Image guys are not making nearly the amount of money that people would think. They're doing okay, nothing to cry over, but in general there are trade-offs all the way down the line. There's a certain freedom in just working for somebody and not having to think about the other stuff. You also kind of have to wince when it comes out, squint because it's all in the conveyor belt.

BP: Is The Maxx going to do any crossovers?

SK: I have this idea in Darker Image about doing a crossover with Maxx trying to join Youngblood.

BP: Wild.

SK: What I was thinking and I still have to work this out with them, I just ran the idea past them and they said, "yeah that sounds cool." I think it would be kind of cool if he tries to join Youngblood and then he's kicked out. I wanted him to try to join Mark Silvestri's group CyberForce. Mark Silvestri said my group is incognito, nobody knows it's around. I was going to have him try to join CyberForce and then they say, "Wow, we're really flattered you tried to join us. Why didn't you try to join Youngblood?" and The Maxx says, "Well, I did, but they turned me down." I wanted to do that but then he said we can't do that because CyberForce is covert. I asked Rob and he said, "Yeah, they have tryouts. Let's have Maxx try to get in." He would come in and say something like. "I'll take 90%," and

I WOULD SAY IN GENERAL THE IMAGE GUYS ARE NOT MAKING NEARLY THE AMOUNT OF MONEY THAT PEOPLE WOULD THINK.

get turned down–just to show he's an anti-hero.

BP: Yeah that would be the boldest contrast I can imagine, The Maxx and Youngblood. It seems to me like Spawn/Maxx mini-series would be a natural because of the tones and the psychological underpinnings of both characters.

SK: It seems like it. That would be something. Spawn is a real 'A' list book and Maxx is so far not an 'A' list book.

BP: That's what you say.

SK: Well, the numbers have come in and it seems to be right about in that same league as Pitt and The Dragon and some of those other books. Spawn's really pretty much up there in terms of...

BP: Yeah, just for the record for folks reading this, the "B" list probably still ranks in the top 10 nationally.

SK: Pitt #1 came in number two. I came in number three, sigh. I said to this guy at Diamond Distributors, "Who's behind me?" and he said," Everybody, you fool!" (*laughs*) What are you complaining about? Okay, I'll shut up. Oh yeah, it sounds as though The Savage Dragon will show up in #3.

BP: This is Brian, the fanboy talking. Really, the Dragon's going to show?!

SK: I've talked to Erik and I said the Dragon's such an upright character and Maxx is such a down and dirty guy, I want to have the Dragon–you know this guy's been killed in issue #1 in the Maxx, I'll have some cops discover that. In the story, there are a couple of kids who are looking in a box, and they see a dead body in there. Then this voice comes up from behind them and it's The Savage Dragon. He says,"What are you boys doing?" And they say, "Oh man, we're checking out this dead body." "Well you youngsters better get along..."

BP:"We'll take care of this from here on in."

SK: I wanted to cut a shot of the Dragon standing upright with the sun shining on his back and cut to the same pose of the Maxx by some garbage cans and stuff. See, some of us are heroes and some of us aren't. I liked that the Hulk was an underdog and that the early Marvel characters were all misfits. I think so far everybody other than Spawn seems to be pretty much a winner in the Image universe. Maybe the Pitt's a kind of an anti-hero.

BP: Yeah. I noticed somewhere in the script that the mask of the Maxx is a separate entity?

SK: Yeah. In fact there's no page 11 in the book because that was the page where Maxx's mask bites off some cop's finger.

BP: It was inferred later.

SK: But his mask...all that little stuff on his forehead moves. His mask is an identity that he discovers is actually the spirit animal of this girl, Julie. It should tie in together. If Julie couldn't learn something about the characters from both worlds, there is no reason to flip back and forth. So what I've got to try to do in the second issue is to tie it together so that both worlds advance the story– That's one of the reasons I think it kind of fell flat because I wanted to do that, but instead you have a bunch of skinny guys with arms grabbing at

Maxx. But we can get that...there's so much I want to do and there's only so much time to do it.

BP: There's only so much you can do in 24 pages.

SK: Well, there's a time factor because I have five days to get seven pages done. Then I give it to Jim Sinclair, who's a real nice guy and he helps me work on it. He essentially inks whatever I don't have time to do. Then I get those pages back from him. I have three days to work on seven pages, then I get them to him on Wednesday. When he takes them, he works until the next Wednesday, he gets them to me and I go over what he's gone over and make it look like me on Thursday and Friday. Then I mail them out to Mike [Heisler]. Mike gets them--wait--I have the schedule right here. Bill gets them on Monday and Bill mails them to Mike who gets them on Thursday, Mike mails them to Steve who gets them Tuesday. So Steve Oliff gets to color them. He's got to get two weeks to color them and maybe we'll budget three. Then it's got to go out of the door. For example, we're trying to get Maxx to go out the door on the 19th of February so it can be in stories on the 12th of March. I'm sweating bullets over being a week late and people are saying hey, it's fine. It's a week late, it's not a month. And I'm saying I don't want to lose anything because the thing is, think about it, these kids are really hungry for this. They really feel cool about it. I remember being so frustrated by Pacific Comics that wouldn't come out.

BP: I used to love the Crow and then suddenly the first couple issues came out and it dropped out of sight. It was a bummer.

"CONSIDERING MOST OF THE ILL-BAKED, HALF-CONCEIVED IDEAS, EVEN IF THE MAXX FAILS COMPLETELY, AT LEAST I'M TRYING TO DO SOMETHING WEIRD."

SK: Yeah. It was. Spawn is coming out pretty regularly. If I was a kid, I'd be Spawn. So I want The Maxx to be something that people think is cool. When I did Aliens I busted my ass to get them all in on time and then I expected everybody to thank me profusely and nobody really did and then I realized why they didn't...because it's supposed to be on time!

BP: That's the expectation.

SK: Yeah it's not, "Wow, thank you so much for being on time." When I go to the market and I want eggs I want them to be there, and if they're not, I'll go to somebody else that has eggs and buy them from him.

BP: That's the bottom line.

SK: The sad thing is that if you can't play in the market, if you don't produce on time, there's somebody else right next to you that will put out some piece of crap, and they'll get that dollar. Todd's regenerated some buzz with some of these writers on Spawn and my way is to try it in the mini-series. If not I'll try another series and if by the fourth issue of the second mini-series people still want to see it, I'll just keep going numerically. The main thing is just to keep trying to put them out a comic every month. I tell you what, considering most of the ill-baked, half-conceived ideas, even if The Maxx fails completely, at least I'm trying to do something weird.

BP: It is. We haven't seen this before, Sam. Your take on this character...you draw a parallel be-

"I STILL FEEL PART OF ME WANTS TO DRAW GREAT LOOKING PANELS, WHICH FIGHTS THE PART THAT WANTS TO HAVE A CINEMATIC STORY THAT WOULD PROBABLY HAVE 24 PANELS A PAGE."

tween a dark, grim, gritty, urban guy hanging out in a box, and the Australian outback, a magical place. Come on. It's different.

SK: Well, the reason I wanted to do the outback was that originally this story will look kind of like a Frazetta story because that's the kind of '70s stuff I used to like to read. The other stuff in The Maxx will be some sort of a Frank Miller urban thing. But then after Bill writes it and his sense of humor warps into it and... I used to get that all the time, oh, you're just trying to rip Wrightson and you're just trying to rip Frazetta and doing it poorly. You're ripping off these guys but I was trying to get it in my own vein.

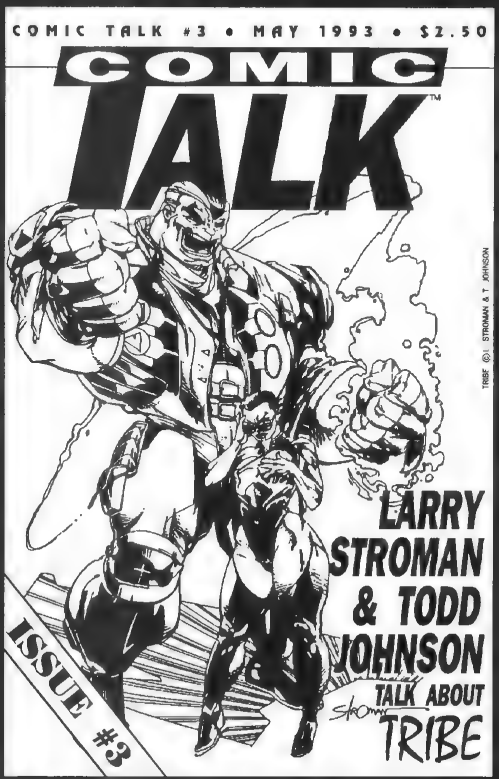
BP: Your paneling is fat! No one panels the way you panel. This is not a stroke either. This is a cold fact. I just don't see people panel the way you panel.

SK: I heard that. I've heard some people...see to me it's hard to conceive, it takes discipline. I'll tell you what took more discipline than anything is that 24 panel page in The Maxx #1. It was cinematic. Something that really made a big impression on me, I can't underestimate it, is the series that Matt Wagner did, Grendel. It was very stylistic with the designs of the pages and when he did Mage he was very minimal. He tried to say I'm not going to draw a panel that's interesting so much as one that tells a story. And it worked. You get hypnotized. Some artists will go for the dramatic. I still feel it's a war in me. I still feel part of me wants to draw great looking panels, which fights the part that wants to have a cinematic story that would probably have 24 panels a page. I'll give you an example from the Maxx book. In the page where he's jumping down onto the gas station you talked about...

BP: Sure. I'm looking at it now, page 22.

SK: Originally, that was just a long

BOOKS



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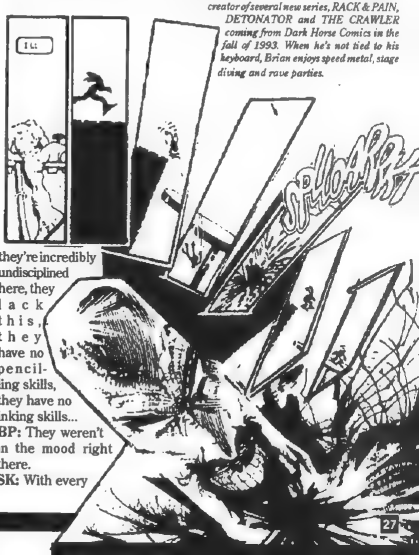
shot of the gas station as he jumped onto that bottom panel. That was the whole page. I thought, well you know we just had 24 panels in the page before, while Maxx is chasing this guy down the gutter. I didn't just do that because I ran out of room, I wanted to be disciplined and try to get something where you weren't looking at the camouflage, but you were looking into the panels and you were temporarily caught up in what was happening. If I was clumsy you felt claustrophobic and you'd say why are we looking at these kinds of panels. In approaching the next page I said, "Well, how am I going to go from all these teeny panels into a regular story again without looking like I ran out of room somewhere?" I wanted to do these panels drifting off and then I was looking at it and I'd think it was Jim [Lee], or somebody who looked at it and said, "Geez, why don't you do something really big there, kind of like a explosion, to relieve all this tension you've built up?" I just did this big shot of Mr. Gone's [the villain's] face. Something like that should have been carefully mapped out. I decided to conclude the sequence.

BP: What happens is on the upper left part of the page you see the panels, they're normal, vertical and horizontal and then they start drifting down and it seems to complete his descent into the world of the bad guy, Mr. Gone.

SK: Yeah it does.

BP: I'm your behind-the-scenes coach. Your instincts are working, dude.

SK: I couldn't think of anything else to do. Originally there was a little gas station mapped out on it and I felt this wasn't going to work. What can I do here? So I decided to do a big shot of his face. I had to determine whether I was doing a big shot of his face to save some time, or doing it to actually advance the story? It's all just a big gobby, gooey mess as far as the motivations and stuff but I'm far too deep in the middle of it to objectively look at it. God, I remember reading a Bill Sienkiewicz interview, and I think he's an incredible artist, but he was talking about Stray Toasters. I thought, "Jesus, what's the deal with that? I don't know." I think Bill will probably be seen as one of our great artists, but I just felt like a goober. I think the best thing I can do is start acting like I know what I'm doing. Then I think people are going to smell it, they're going to find something that can make them look at my work. Everybody has corners of the bed that are untucked. I mean you and I could be painfully honest right now and mention our top five favorite artists and we could rip apart their corners. We could say oh look they're incredibly undisciplined here, they lack this, they have no pencilling skills, they have no inking skills...



BP: They weren't in the mood right there.

SK: With every artist, there's faults that you can find. I lack discipline, there's just a lack of fundamental structure in my drawing. There's just a million things that could be done better in The Maxx #1 and hopefully will, but it's movies. If a movie director has a beautiful sense of cinematics like Ridley Scott then you're a genius. There's only a few people that are able to do several things at once. So if I have my panels of big guys, I mean if this is the best that I can do, then that's me shooting my wad.

BP: That says it all.

SK: You've been so patient.

BP: Peace, Sam. You're a serious trip.

SK: Over and out.

Brian Pulido is the creator and Publisher of CHAOS! Comics whose first series, EVIL ERNIE: THE RESURRECTION will debut in May. In addition, Brian is the writer and creator of several new series, RACK & PAIN, DETONATOR and THE CRAWLER coming from Dark Horse Comics in the fall of 1993. When he's not tied to his keyboard, Brian enjoys speed metal, stage diving and rave parties.

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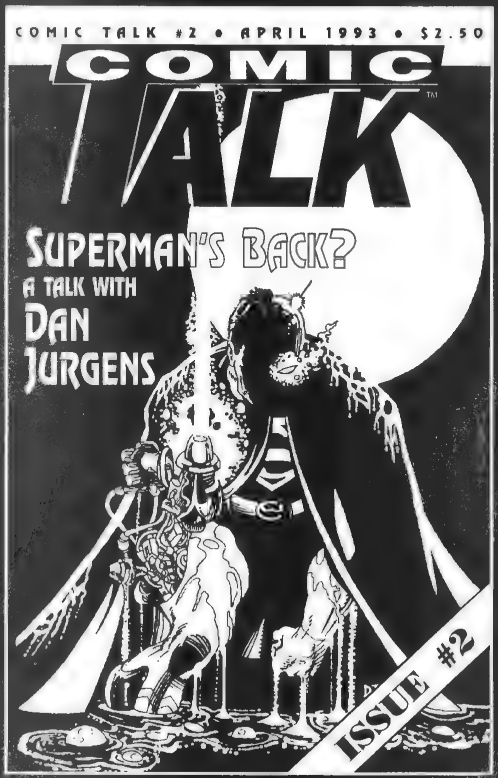

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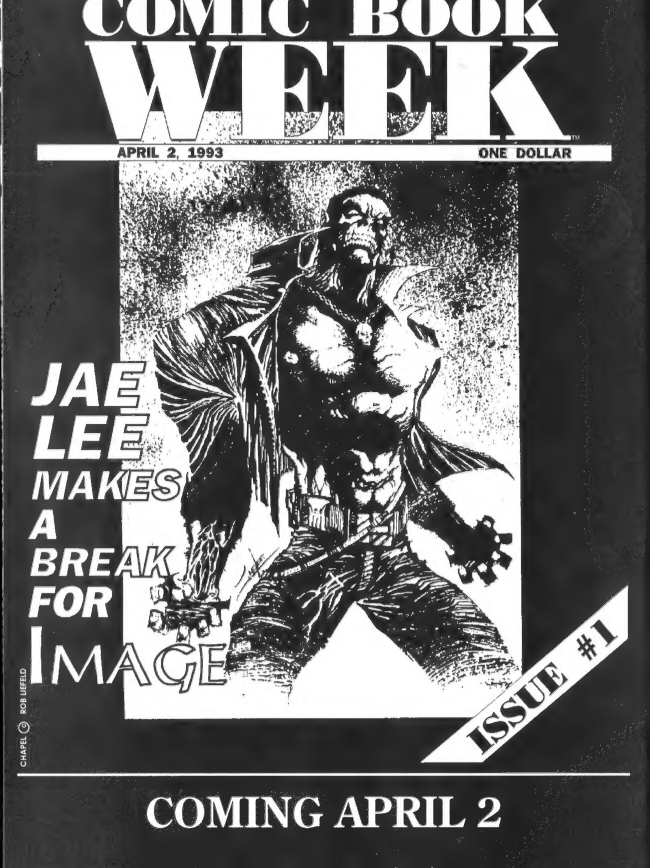

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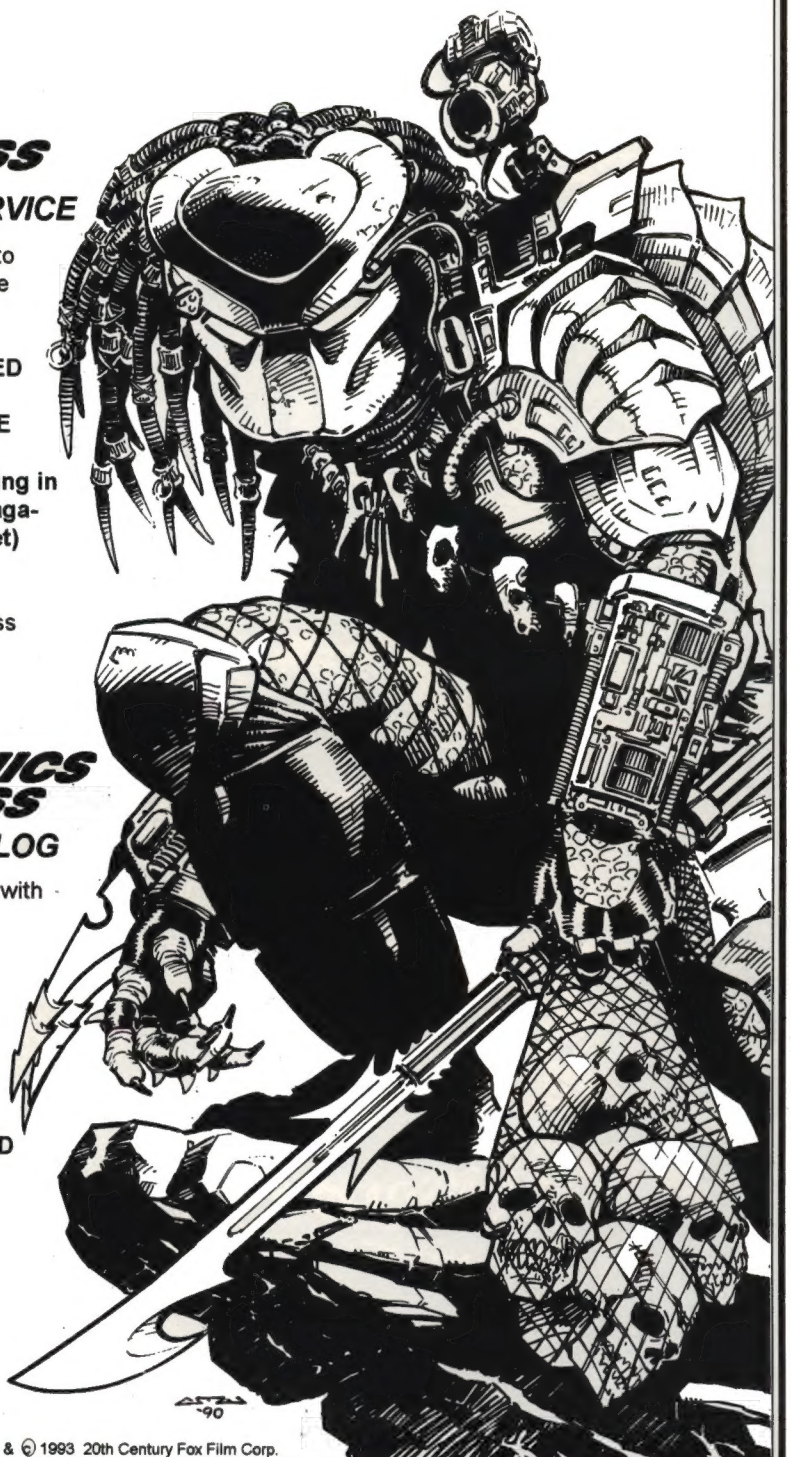

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